DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 283 156 CS 210 524

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TITLE Idea Generation Techniques for Sparking Creative Advertising Ideas.
PUB DATE Aug 87
NOTE 15p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication (70th, San Antonio, TX, August 1-4, 1987).
PUB TYPE Guides - Classroom Use - Guides (For Teachers) (052) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Advertising; *Creativity; Education Work Relationship; Higher Education; Journalism Education; Mass Media; *Persuasive Discourse; *Skill Development; *Teaching Methods
IDENTIFIERS Advertisements; *Advertising Copywriting; Audience Awareness; *Idea Generation

ABSTRACT

In advertising, a creative idea can be defined as being right or on strategy in a unique way. For a copywriter, it is not easy to create an ad that has the "Big Idea" in it. Some helpful techniques that advertising students can use to generate creative ideas are (1) analogy, (2) forced relationships, (3) doing the opposite of what everyone else is doing, and (4) closure. Sense analogy was used in David Ogilvy's famous headline for Rolls Royce: "At 60 miles an hour the only sound you hear is the ticking of the clock." The comparison is with total silence. Forced relationships are similar to analogies but more contrived. An example of this technique is the Voit ad in which sporting goods equipment is shaped in the form of a Christmas tree. Doing the opposite can mean the opposite of what the competition is doing, the opposite of what is normally found in that particular medium, or even the opposite of what the audience is likely to expect. Closure is designed to involve audience members in an ad by having them complete and fill in various words or pictures. In a classic Volkswagen ad, verbal closure is used because a dependent clause, "or buy a Volkswagen," demands partnership with an independent clause. A common thread in these ads is their tendency to convey a single, meaningful idea instantly and with creative impact. The techniques exemplified in the ads are in everyday use by creative minds in advertising, and can be equally helpful for advertising students. (NKA)

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IDEA GENERATION TECHNIQUES FOR SPARKING CREATIVE ADVERTISING IDEAS

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ABSTRACT

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Students in advertising creative strategy and copywriting classes are expected to create advertising ideas which are unique, powerful, relevant, and meaningful. It is not an easy task. The very words we tell students, words like "be creative with your ideas" are wide open to interpretation, offer little help in making the task easier and frequently only serve to raise difficult questions in their minds. The answers, too, are not easy. But, by observing those creative ideas as they are actualized in advertising, students are better able to demystify the entire process of creativity. Indeed, many of those advertising ideas which surround us everyday are a means for understanding how the creative advertising mind works and the techniques it uses to generate its ideas. The purpose here is to identify four of those techniques and thus provide students with some of the tools which can be used to help them generate the creative idea, the *Big Idea*.

IDEA GENERATION TECHNIQUES FOR SPARKING CREATIVE ADVERTISING IDEAS

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Does this sound at all familiar? After having returned graded assignments back to your advertising copywriting class, you are besieged by a host of students, some with daggers in their eyes, others with tears, and all with pretty much the same lament. It goes something like this: "You never told us how to be creative. You never told us how to be original or unique. So how come you graded down because our ideas didn't have advertising "feel" or didn't take the top of your head off?" Patient as can be, you proceed to restate the importance of ads taking the top of someone's head off. Shifting and squirming, the students mumble under their breaths, and it's clear to you that they would indeed like to take the top of someone's head off, yours. What happened to have it come to this? What was missing from the time of giving the assignment to the time of having received and graded it? One possibility is that skepticism over whether creativity can be taught restricted the amount of teaching devoted to creativity in the classroom. Another possibility is that in going by the book (virtually any book on advertising creative strategy), the class spent an inordinate amount of time discussing the rules of creative strategy and copywriting but not enough time on those techniques which break certain rules of reality and are helpful in the sparking of an ad idea. Yet, the quality of that idea, the all-important creative concept, is the highlight of a successful ad or campaign. Without a creative idea, everything else on the creative side pales. Of course, the lingering question then for students and professionals as well is How do you spark that creative idea? Are there techniques which anyone on the creative side of the business can use to help in that discovery? The answer is Yes, there are. And, to know what they are is a matter of knowing what a creative idea is and then re-creating the workings of the minds behind many of the creative ideas we are exposed to in our everyday contact with ads.

What is a Creative Idea?

Let's really surround that question with a host of answers. A creative idea is being right or on strategy in a unique way. For us, that's the best answer. A creative idea makes people wonder why they never looked at it that way before. Another good answer. A creative idea contains a "quality of the unexpected." Still another good answer. A creative idea has the element of surprise. Sounds like our last answer. A creative idea breaks "the boredom barrier." Again, a good answer. A creative idea goes directly to the head or heart or both. A creative idea is instantly meaningful. A creative idea is singular, not plural. A creative idea is different from other creative ideas. All good answers.

Fine, if these are good answers to what a creative idea is, then what are the bad answers? A creative idea is just being right or on strategy. A bad answer. A creative idea reminds people of a way they've always looked at it before. Another bad answer. A creative idea is expected and unsurprising. A creative idea is dull and boring. A creative idea never makes it to the head or heart or both because it is dull and boring. A creative idea is instantly meaningless and confusing. A creative idea contains a lot of creative ideas. A creative idea is the same as other creative ideas. All bad, very bad answers.

Of course, all of this is always very clear and sensible to students. More so, it sounds easy to do or at least to know what to do. However, it isn't. Being both right and unique is not easy in the same way that being unexpected, surprising and singular are not easy. What is easy is being either right or unique but not both. What is also easy is being expected and unsurprising. And, it's certainly easy to create an ad with a lot of ideas in it. After all, it seems safe (if one thing goes wrong, something else can pick it up) and less risky (no single, frail limb can be sawed off where it meets the tree). But, what's not so easy is to create an ad which has one idea in it, and that idea is the *Big Idea*. With a *Big Idea* you hold all your eggs in one basket while sitting precariously perched on the edge of the limb. Very uncomfortable, indeed. And very difficult to deal with, especially for students. But, this is where the difficulty lies - in convincing students that they're allowed, indeed encouraged to be unique with a *Big Idea* and then in showing them the ways it's done. Very few students, if any, have ever been told to be unique. Instead, for all their years of formal schooling they've been told over and over again to be the same, not different. They've been told to do what's expected, not what's unexpected. And, they've been told to look at things the way everybody else looks at things, not in their own way. Not very good preparation

for working on the creative side, wouldn't you say? In an Advertising Age debate between Joe Secco and Gene Gramm, Secco comments on Gramm's directives to students in a class taught at The Parson's School of Design. He says, "The copywriter who gets to be creative director at the agency is the one who knows how to break the rules." 1 So, one of the first things students must be taught is that they do have the freedom to be unique and in being unique, to break rules. And, the second thing they must be taught are the ways to do it.

How does the creative mind break rules?

For the creative mind, reality is nothing more than a toy to be played with. Noted creativity theorist and researcher, Carl R. Rogers, has identified one dominant characteristic of the creative mind as an "ability to toy with elements and concepts." 2 Rogers's use of the word "toy" is important for that is what the creative mind does when it generates ideas. It toys with realities. And, in its toying it invariably transforms certain realities into new realities. What this boils down to is that the creative mind is adept at breaking the rules of reality. Indeed, the rules of reality exist beyond the creative mind since it only thinks of realities as elastic, portable and mutable. It thinks of them as putty in its hands. It shapes them anyway it wishes, and they respond to the artist's touch. Realities can be destroyed, rearranged, transformed, or combined. These are the things the creative mind does to realities. And, generating advertising ideas stems primarily from one or more of these acts.

What do the following advertising ideas have in common? For Hertz, O.J. Simpson literally flies through an airport terminal? For Parkay Margarine, a man lifts a container lid and the product speaks to him? For Vanish toilet bowl cleaner, toilet seats become upper lips which move when the bowls speak to us? The list of such advertising examples is, of course, endless. But, the three noted here serve to make the point. Unique advertising ideas create their own realities out of existing realities. In one reality, people don't fly through airport terminals. Indeed, people don't fly, period. Yet, we tend to associate speed with things that fly. So, if speed is what you're selling, then have someone fly. But, in order to do that you must create your own reality out of existing realities such as people, things that fly and airport terminals. In another reality, margarine can't speak. But, in the new reality, what would margarine say if it were mistaken for butter? In still another reality, toilet bowl seats can't be lips. But, if an important benefit of the product you're selling is cleaning strength, then in the new reality you

can have toilet bowls personified as a platoon of soldiers who march off to do battle against grit and grime and proceed to tell us about it.

In each of these examples, the creative mind behind the idea destroyed preconceived notions of reality. In so doing, it created a new reality, one merging what may seem to the uncreative mind to be unmergeable entities. However, if the creative mind were stuck in the commonplace realm of empirical reality, then the creative idea never would have existed. For instance, if an airport terminal were simply a place where people walked or ran, then the idea of flying never would have been realized. If margarine doesn't talk - no way, no how - then the idea of talking margarine never would have been realized. Naturally, the same holds true for toilet bowls. The point, of course, is that a key to generating advertising ideas is to avoid thinking of realities too literally. They are there to be reformulated. That's their purpose as far as advertising is concerned. Take a human being and give him the ability to fly. Take margarine and let it speak. Take toilet bowl seats and imagine them as lips instead. Here, it is this putty-like, flexible and malleable quality of realities which becomes the essence behind the creative mind's ability to generate creative ideas.

Creative ideas by analogy

Once again, it is significantly easier to identify and define how the creative mind discovers ideas than it is to actually do it. But, there are techniques which can be helpful, and there is perhaps no more helpful technique than that of creating ideas by analogy. An analogy is a comparison of similarities between existing realities. What results from the comparison is a new reality, the creative idea: "We start out with two worlds, but by focusing on their similarities we create a third 'overworld.' " 3 It is this 'overworld' which is the idea, and its creation has a potentially strong impact on the audience. According to Sandra E. Moriarty, a metaphor or analogy "may be even stronger than a statement of fact because the audience becomes involved in the message as they complete the association from their own experience. They are participating in the creation of an idea." 4 To induce involvement, either of the head or heart or both, is critical to the effectiveness of the creative idea, and analogies are one means to achieve that goal.

In creating new realities from analogies, the creative mind asks itself what something about the product is like. This is the comparison, but it can take many forms with each one being a

tool for generating an abundance of potential ideas. For example, one form of analogy is that of sense comparisons. In this respect, by using sense analogies there is an automatic appeal to the senses of the audience, an appeal to those organs which are the entry points to the head and heart, organs such as the eyes, ears or nose. Frank DeVito, President and Director of Creative Services for SSC&B: Lintas, USA, believes "total sensory communication" is the most important task for advertising's creative minds. 5 And, sense analogies are one way to accomplish that task. David Ogilvy's famous headline for Rolls Royce, "At sixty miles an hour the only sound you hear is the ticking of the clock," is an example of a sense analogy because somewhere along the idea generation line, Ogilvy had to ask himself what the sound of a Rolls Royce at sixty miles an hour was like or not like. It was like total silence. And, it was not like the sounds we're accustomed to hearing normally when we ride in a car.

In the Maxell ad, another sense analogy is used.

SLIDE 1 ABOUT HERE

Here, the creative mind behind the ad had to ask itself what the sound from the product was like? Even more so and in very creative fashion, it had to mix senses and ask itself what the sound felt like? The answer was that it felt like a wind. In fact, it felt like a blast of wind which has the potential to blow us away. And, as we look at the ad, the quality of unexpectedness and surprise immediately helps to grab our attention thus yoking us into at least an initial involvement with the ad. But as with so many creative ideas, the Maxell ad is not just an example of creativity for creativity's sake. Instead, there is a meaningful benefit conveyed, that of being blown away which is something this particular target market would desire, and it is conveyed instantly. Indeed, one doesn't even have to read the ad to get the *Big Idea*.

In a similar way, the creative mind behind the Molson ad had to ask itself what the taste of the product was like.

SLIDE 2 ABOUT HERE

Here, the taste of Molson is like a cool mountain stream. And, isn't this exactly how the mind behind the Coors Beer campaign thought when it invited the target market to "Taste the high country?" There are many such sense analogies in advertising, and they are created by asking

a basic question: What does my product, service or store sound like? Feel like? Taste like? Look like? And, smell like? Mennen Skin Bracer, for example, used to compare the use of its product to a slap in the face. In all likelihood, the creative idea came from an answer to the question What does our product feel like? Or, what is the sound of Kellogg's Rice Krispies like? It's like snap, crackle and pop. What does a cool glass of Nestea iced tea feel like? It feels like a refreshing plunge in the water.

Beyond using the senses, there are still other ways analogies can be created. For example, asking what the product symbolizes or what symbolizes the product can help generate new realities which evolve to the creative idea. State Farm, for instance, uses an analogy of its company compared to a neighbor. And, Allstate uses an analogy of its company compared to cupped hands. In both instances, the creative minds behind the ideas had to ask themselves just what their services were like in terms of symbols. In the State Farm example, the service is like the comfortable feeling of having a good neighbor. In the Allstate example, the service is like the security one feels with the caring image of cupped hands. A similar type of analogy based on a symbolic association or comparison can be seen in the Bond Jewelers ad.

SLIDE 3 ABOUT HERE

The analogy here is between Bonds, its jewelry and fine, old and perhaps rare books. In an instant, the audience receives the impression that Bond Jewelers is knowledgeable and prestigious and that its jewelry has time tested value and quality. In like fashion, the analogy in the Patcraft Carpet ad is based on a symbolic association between the carpet and sand.

SLIDE 4 ABOUT HERE

In all likelihood, the creative mind behind this ad was considering certain product selling points and benefits such as durability, color and comfort. And, as we look at the ad we can re-create that mind's activity as it asked itself what was as durable as the carpet? One of the answers was sand, and eventually the image of sand was overlaid onto the image of the carpet as the creative idea began to take shape.

One glance at our TVs or one skim through a magazine is enough to convince us that analogy is an active part of the advertising creative mind. We have noted just several examples of how

analogies can be formed. But, they are abundant in all of the media. The point, of course, is to use analogies as a means for generating creative ideas. In our examples, the ideas evolved through comparisons. But, they were comparisons of certain realities which culminated in new realities, the advertising creative ideas. For students and professionals alike, this allowance to break the rules of existing reality is vital to sparking those creative ideas. And, it is only by breaking these rules that a carpet is timeless like sand, that an audio tape blows you away like a blast of wind, and that a bottle of beer tastes like a winter scene.

Creative Ideas by Forced Relationships

A similar technique to analogy is that of forced relationships in that comparisons are made between what's being advertised and certain other realities. However, unlike analogies, forced relationships are more contrived since the comparisons rely on what may initially seem to be dissimilar entities. Still, the process of forced relationships can be a valuable tool for overcoming creative blocks because the creative mind is literally forced to find connections and thus a new reality, a creative idea. In his book, Lateral Thinking, Edward deBono refers to this technique as "random stimulation," and the technique itself is part of Sidney J. Parnes's recommended arsenal for creative problem-solving. 6 The key to a forced relationship is to take virtually anything in one's consciousness field and cram it together with the advertising problem or product, regardless of how dissimilar the cramming appears to be.

An example of a forced relationship occurs in this Voit ad where sporting goods equipment is shaped in the form of a Christmas tree.

SLIDE 5 ABOUT HERE

Obviously, the creative mind behind this ad was working within a certain strategy, the main elements of which probably included emphasis on the variety and selection of equipment and a holiday season motif. What the mind did from here was to force together the products with a random selection of holiday images. Initially, perhaps those images included such realities as sleighs, fireplaces or stockings. Perhaps, too, the mind toyed with the possibility of stuffing the products in a sleigh or hanging them in stockings from a fireplace. But, eventually the creative idea became one which altered any preconceived notions one might have regarding a Christmas

tree. And, that is one of the values of a forced relationship. It tends to shout about its new reality. And, it tends to force creativity to happen. After all, each of us is locked into our perceptions of reality. A tree is a tree. And, trees are green. We have been conditioned by empirical reality to accept such perceptions. But, these types of literal perceptions are not within the province of the creative mind. Instead, the shattering of these perceptions is that mind's province. In the Voit ad, the only preconceived notion of the reality of Christmas trees which survives is that of the shape. Other than that, everything else is gone - branches, needles, ornaments, everything.

To my experience, students are very fond of playing with forced relationships since the technique has a special power to make things happen. For example, in preparing students to create ideas for entry in the annual Nissan student competition, I invariably ask them to force relationships between their car and anything in their consciousness. One time I was peering over a student's shoulder at his thumbnails and headline ideas. He seemed particularly frustrated and told me he couldn't come up with anything for the then Datsun 280ZX. I asked him if he had tried forced relationships, and he said he had. But, he also said it was outrageous to think of a 280ZX and a boxing ring. After all, cars aren't found in boxing rings. I reminded him that in advertising, cars can be found on the moon if that helps to convey the right benefit to the right market. He shrugged, and I walked him to a back room, encouraging him to think about that relationship of a boxing ring and the 280Z. Within minutes he was at my side with that familiar look of Eureka, wide-eyed and chomping at the bit to communicate what had suddenly dawned on him. "How's this sound?," he asked. "Floats like a butterfly. Stings like a Z." Convinced that it conveyed the key benefits of the car, he entered the final ad concept into the competition and received an award. But, the point is he never would have come up with that idea if he hadn't believed he could alter certain realities in order to create a new reality, his creative idea.

Creative Ideas by Doing the Opposite

Another idea generation technique which is an even more dramatic breaking of certain rules is that of doing the opposite. In a debate among ad agency creatives at a New York Ad Club gathering, Ed McCabe said, "If you look at something and say 'I want to do something like that,' you're already lost. When they do all pictures, I'll do all words." 7 There can be no misinterpreting what McCabe meant. Look at what those around you are doing and do the

opposite. In this way you create the 'quality of the unexpected,' and that immediately gains the attention of your audience. Yet, even doing the opposite has various parts which can provide one with alternative routes for generating ideas. For example, you can do the opposite of what your competition is doing. Or, you can do the opposite of what is normally found in that particular medium. Or, you can do the opposite of what your audience is likely to expect.

An example of doing the opposite can be seen in the Volkswagen ad.

SLIDE 6 ABOUT HERE

Here, the announcement of "This is not a car," runs counter to what most car advertisers tend to say. As a result, its immediate impact is strong, grabbing attention and arousing curiosity about what is meant by the statement. As readers, we would be more likely to expect a car ad to say "Now this is a car." But, for Volkswagen, the 'quality of the unexpected' is achieved by a topsy turvy variation on what is normally expected.

Indeed, doing the opposite has proved to be a very popular technique found in a variety of creative advertising. For example, AT&T recently ran a series of magazine, newspaper and television ads using Clark Kent/Superman and Lois Lane in a cartoon/animation format. Clearly, this goes against the grain of other Bell company advertising. It also goes against the grain of what we have come to expect from a very serious, professional communications giant. And, it goes against the grain of what we have come to expect in the way of advertising in those particular media. Similarly, Shearson Lehman ran a series of black and white television spots which used typography almost exclusively so that you had to read the message. This is not what we have come to expect in this age of rapid fire, colorful, high-intensity video images. And, during the fall of 1986, Transamerica Corporation ran a pop up ad in Time magazine. At the time, this was not what we expected in magazines. It was also not what we expected from an insurance company.

Obviously, doing the opposite is one way of grabbing attention. And, to generate ideas using this technique one has to be an astute observer of what the competition is doing, what the media tends to include, and what the audience has come to expect. In using any one or all of these approaches, the creative mind is able to enlarge the pool of potential ideas. From that point, it is simply a matter of selection based on criteria inherent in the strategy and the desired advertising effect.

Creative Ideas by Closure

As we've discussed, if an ad can gain both attention and involvement from its prospective audience, it has achieved important marks of success. Creative ideas stemming from analogies, forced relationships and doing the opposite tend toward that kind of achievement. So, too , do ideas stemming from closure which is the psychological term for the human inclination to complete incompletions and to fill in missing parts. In an advertising sense, closure is a technique designed to yoke audience members into an ad by having them complete and fill in various words or pictures. In this respect, there are two types of closure the creative mind can use to generate ideas- verbal and visual.

In the already classic Volkswagen ad, verbal closure is used because the dependent clause, "Or buy a Volkswagen," demands partnership with an independent clause.

SLIDE 7 ABOUT HERE

In truth, the actual headline for this ad is something like "You can blow your brains out over the price of gasoline...Or buy a Volkswagen." But, the first part of that headline takes place in the mind of the reader, not in the headline per se. The use of 'Or' as a conjunction forces the reader to become involved in the creation of the remainder of the headline, and, of course, this is very involving for that reader. You may also notice the use of an analogy in this ad in which case the gas nozzle is compared to a gun. But, the core of the creative idea is in its use of closure as an attention grabbing, involving technique. As another example, perhaps you recall a recent Hewlett Packard campaign which exemplifies verbal closure by stating "What if...., with the ellipsis inviting a completion of the sentence by the audience.

Visual closure is also a means for yoking audience attention and inducing involvement. For example, in the Bausch and Lomb ad, the reader is actually invited to try and find the soft lens among the water drops.

SLIDE 8 ABOUT HERE

In this respect, the ad manages to pull the reader inside and to consequently destroy the veneer

which separates the ad and that reader. As this process of involvement takes place, the reader's consciousness is imbued with the ad, and they become one. Such an effect is, of course, a major goal of all advertising creative ideas.

We have looked at eight ads and talked about a number of others as they illustrate what the activities were in the creative minds which invented them. And, though the ads illustrate a variety of idea generation, creative techniques, they each have common threads which serve to make them examples of *Big Ideas*. For instance, each ad creates a new reality, the reality we know as the creative idea. But, in most of our examples, this could only be accomplished by a shattering of existing realities, by a breaking of certain rules which have been dictated to us by those realities. This is standard fare for the advertising creative mind for it realizes that in creating new realities, it is surprising the audience and thus grabbing attention. Still, another common thread to our ads is that they tend to convey a single, meaningful idea. For Maxell it was the ultimate power of high impact sound. For Volt it was vast variety and selection. And, even for Bausch and Lomb, it was the symbolic association we make between what's comfortable and the images of water and lily pads. Those single ideas are conveyed instantly and with creative impact. In this sense, there is no mistaking what we can expect to get in the way of benefits from those products.

The techniques exemplified in our ads are techniques in everyday use by the advertising creative mind. There is no mystery about them simply because they are so frequently on display. And, this display can serve to not only enlighten students but to encourage them as well. Students are intimidated by the vagueness and threat of the word 'creativity.' But, ads such as those shown here help to undermine that vagueness and threat. They show students what advertising creative ideas are, and if there's a re-creation of the minds behind those ideas, they can show students how to create. At the worst, students will at least have some tools, some tangible possibilities and ways of breaking rules so that they can lift their ideas above the ordinary and mundane and proceed to capture the creative 'feel' evident in so much of the advertising which surrounds us.

NOTES

1. Joe Secco and Gene Gramm, "Can Creativity Be Systematized?," Advertising Age, November 18, 1985, p. 46.

2. Carl R. Rogers, "Toward A Theory of Creativity," in Creativity and Its Cultivation, ed., H.H. Anderson (New York: Harper & Row, 1959), pp. 75-79.

3. Richard W. Samson, The Mind Builder: A Self-Teaching Guide to Creative Thinking and Analysis (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., 1965), p. 60.

4. Sandra E. Moriarty, Creative Advertising: Theory and Practice (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1986), pp. 4-5.

5. "Execs Analyze Creativity," Advertising Age, June 17, 1985, p. 42.

6. Edward de Bono, Lateral Thinking: Creativity Step by Step (New York: Harper & Row, 1970). And, Sidney J. Parnes, A Guidebook for Creative Thinking (Buffalo: Creative Problem-Solving Institute, 1975).

7. Stewart Alter, "New York Ad Club Hears Agency Creatives," Advertising Age, September 30, 1985, p. 86.